

# The Word From the EBU -- Sietse Bakker Dishes On Everything

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**Sietse Bakker** is the EBU's event supervisor for the Eurovision Song Contest, which makes him a rather big deal in Eurovision Nation. Despite his various commitments, he was nice enough to sit down for an interview to answer questions on everything from the expense of the contest to fraud to the contest's voting structure. We also pondered the hypothetical situation that Zlata Ognevich had won in 2013. Would the show have gone on in Ukraine?

*You can listen to the complete audio of the interview by [clicking here](#). We've summarized the highlights below.*

## **Why is Eurovision so Popular?**

Sietse pointed out that there is a long tradition where families have been watching it forever. Second there is the notion of country pride, like in the Olympics.

## **What Changes Will we see in the Future?**

Sietse did not list anything specific, but he did talk at length about how Eurovision has always been technologically driven and they will continue to look at new possibilities.

I asked if they might do green screen technology in the future for the acts (where the background seen on TV is computer generated). He discussed how this has been done for the scoreboard since '96 and he did say it is possible. Who knows if/when they'll allow it but this does show he's open to changes this radical.

We then went into a discussion of the best place to watch the show. I stated my preference, which is standing right in front of the stage. His preference is to watch on TV because that way you see it from every angle. Sietse gets to watch every year from backstage on a small HD screen.

## **The Contest is Too Damn Expensive**

I then asked about the cost of the contest to the participating countries. He first talked about how the contest is a screaming good deal for the local TV stations, which get seven hours of very popular content that everyone is watching. So he seems very comfortable with the cost to participate, although I'm guessing many smaller countries might disagree.

His big concern is about the costs to the host. He says they are focused on reducing what it costs a country to host the show as that is very expensive. So the EBU focus is on reducing that cost. This is interesting as countries desperately want to win and get a nice bump in tourist income during the two weeks, and gigantic publicity during the show in front of all of Europe. While everyone prefers to spend less, I would guess most hosting countries are thrilled to win and see it as a net positive.

### **B&W Hallerne - Really?**

I next asked what was the biggest surprise and Sietse was surprised that Copenhagen chose B&W Hallerne over the Parken Stadium and "instead went for a shipyard that brings a lot of complications." He clearly is not a fan of the "rusty old shipyard full of barrels" as the venue.

I asked if they'll be ready in time and he thinks they will, but that they have a lot of really hard work remaining to complete it in time. And they could well end up like in Baku (also a new building) where, when they move in with their equipment, they'll still be completing the construction. So if you hear a buzz saw during one of the act's performances, that may be their background track, or that may be the construction workers backstage.

I guess we'll find out when we show up if they are able to complete the work in time. Hopefully they'll be like Baku where it was (barely) ready. It better be...

### **What if Zlata Had Won?**

Zlata could should have won last year and in that case this year would be in the Ukraine. I asked what they would be doing right now if that were the case. Sietse first talked about 2005 which was held there just after the Orange Revolution. But it had settled down by then and so it all worked out well. Same for this year with the Junior Eurovision.

He then went on to say with the situation as it is now, it would not be safe enough. And in that case he said they would go to Germany and Sweden and get one of them to take over last minute to take over hosting.

### **Stuffing the Ballot Box**

Sietse first walked me through what has been brought to the EBU's attention and explained that they investigated the allegations as best they could. Sietse was precise with his language. He did not claim there has not been fraud, but that they have been unable to find the evidence of fraud.

I asked if there has been any statistical analysis of the vote that suggests there have been fraudulent votes cast, even if you can't show how. He replied that they do a lot of analysis of the voting but did not comment on whether things looked fishy to him.

As we all know, Malta routinely gives Azerbaijan top points, despite the fact their nations have no apparent cultural affinities or historical connections. Sietse has a logical explanation for the voting. All nations are allowed to do PR, and Azerbaijan regularly invests resources into Malta. They sell their entry to the sunny island and their efforts can have a significant impact on the vote. Some may view that as a stretch, but it is certainly a fair argument.

Next he discussed the rumors of jury vote trading. He explain that there are safety checks in place. Jurors have means to report questionable behavior, and they have one on one interviews with EBU officials. He also encouraged those with evidence to come forward. He cannot tackle the problem without evidence it exists.

To Sietse's credit, he went through all the major cases that have come up as part of the Eurovision 2013 voting scandal. He never claimed it didn't happen, and consistently pleaded for someone with evidence to step forward. I don't think this is a case of the EBU closing its eyes to the issue. But without evidence, they can't do anything. And that is a very fair point - you don't sanction countries on rumors.

Going forward they've taken a gigantic step toward eliminating fraud. Starting this year they will release all the votes, jury votes by juror, jury & televote totals by country, etc. This won't stop vote fraud. This won't identify how the fraud is accomplished. But it will easily and unequivocally identify if it is occurring and to who's benefit. (They can't do this for past years as they didn't make that release a requirement of each country.)

### **Enron Auditing**

Remember how Enron always got approval from their auditors? Eurovision uses PWC to audit every step of the voting process. I asked about the case of Italy where their jury clearly did not meet the requirements for a country's jury. I asked if the PWC audit had any credibility when they missed something so easy & basic.

He discussed how it happened, that the paperwork comes in for a couple of jurors, then later for others. And it's all on paper. So no one had a point where they looked at all the members, then verified the demographics of all of them matched the requirements. They are changing this to a system where each is entered electronically and the system will immediately verify the demographic requirements are all met.

Ok, good step. But it didn't speak to the credibility of PWC. When I suggested they might want to consider a different auditor, he replied that most of their effort occurs on the day of the voting. And he then discussed in detail what they do observing the jury voting.

The bottom line is EBU is improving the system to avoid this problem in the future. But I think they're comfortable with PWC and therefore continuing with an auditor who missed a clear and obvious problem. So I don't put much credibility in the statement "this is all audited by PWC."

### **The Impact of Running Order**

Sietse agrees that there is a slight advantage to performing at the end of the show (I tend to think it's more substantial).

He believes that the present system, where acts draw to perform in the first or second half of the show, and where producers actually order them, works well. It allows for fair positioning of the acts while also allowing producers to create a more compelling show.

I then asked about playing the recap of the acts in reverse order to mitigate the impact. Sietse says this is not under consideration. First, it's a lot harder for the people creating the clips to put them together in reverse order (which strikes me as a minor problem). Second, they are worried that people might get confused as many watching the show are already struggling to remember the number of each act.

He brought up the fair point that the number of competing acts is small, which creates a large degree of uncertainty if you tried to run stats on the numbers. But that doesn't make it impossible. I think the bottom line is that the EBU is comfortable with the impact of draw order as everything presently works. Sietse does not think this is that big of an issue, and that it does not matter to a country that much if they perform tenth instead of eighth. And that the act that wins will win regardless of its start position. He thinks it can matter if it is very close for first place, but that has not happened for some time.

### **It's the Jury plus the Televote**

There are many ways to structure the voting, and many ways to structure how you combine the jury and televote. I asked Sietse about the present system and if it might change. He replied that the present implementation is purposely designed so an act must get high votes from both the televote and jury vote. The present system definitely works that way. If you look at Cezar's votes in Italy where that emphasis on scoring high with both votes took his first place televote and turned it into 1 point. Fundamentally this gives both the jury and the televote in each country a veto over any act doing well. I can see arguments both for and against this, but this result is by design and one the EBU wants to see.

### **What Would You Change**

Ok, here's your chance to tell EBU what you would do differently. Sietse ended the interview by asking "if you could propose one thing you could change one thing in the song contest to make it better, what would it be?" Here's your chance - sound off in the comments below.